

Swiss Chard

Swiss chard (*Beta vulgaris* var. *cicla*) is also known by the names Silverbeet, Perpetual Spinach, Spinach Beet, Crab Beet, Seakale Beet, and Mangold. This leafy vegetable is a cultivated descendant of the sea beet, *Beta vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*. It is in the same species as beetroots (garden beet) except it lacks the swollen, edible storage root. The word Swiss was used to distinguish chard from French spinach varieties by 19th century seed catalog publishers. The first varieties of this popular leafy vegetable have been traced to Sicily. Fresh, young chard can be used raw in salads. Mature chard leaves and stalks are typically cooked or sautéed. Their bitterness fades with cooking, leaving a refined flavor which is more delicate than that of cooked spinach.

Cultivars of chard include green forms, such as 'Lucullus' and 'Fordhook Giant,' as well as red-ribbed forms such as 'Ruby Chard,' 'Rainbow Chard,' and 'Rhubarb Chard.' All parts of the chard plant contain oxalic acid.

Swiss chard leaves grow vigorously throughout the season.

Planting:

Direct sowing is preferable to transplanting because there is less root disturbance. Sow anytime between April 15th and June 15th. Plant in loose, rich, well-drained and deeply cultivated soil in wide rows or beds with full sun. Like beets, the seed is really a fruit containing several embryos which will need to be thinned. Space seeds 2 inches apart in all directions, and cover with ½-inch of fine soil or 1 inch of sandy soil. Thin plants to 4 inches apart when they are about 2 inches high. You can re-plant the thinned seedlings but you will need to water them twice daily until they establish new root systems.

Cultivation:

- **Fertilizing** - Apply a pre-plant fertilizer before

seeding this heavy feeder. In August trim old leaves and provide plants with a light side-dressing of fertilizer.

- **Watering** - Keep plants uniformly supplied with moisture for best performance. Water deeply and regularly during dry periods.
- **Weeding** - Remove all young weed seedlings by hand and use a mulch laid along each side of the row to keep weed seeds from germinating. Thin by removing (cutting) plants in early summer so that spacing is about 8-12 inches apart.
- **Special directions** – Soaking seed in warm water for 24 hours before sowing will aid germination and may help prevent soil rot and seed maggot problems in cool, spring soil.

Harvesting:

Chard can be harvested while the leaves are young and tender or after maturity when they are larger and have slightly tougher stems. Young leaves (smaller than 4 inches) may be eaten fresh in salads. Mature leaves may be chopped and sautéed. The "ribs" may be eaten like celery. It can be harvested until frost. At any point in the growing season, snip leaves 2 inches above crowns to rejuvenate plants. New, succulent leaves soon will be ready to harvest.

Storage and Preservation:

Chard is extremely perishable. It stores best in very cold (32°F), moist (95% Relative Humidity) environment. Store in the refrigerator in a vented plastic bag.

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